Working in Groups

OBJECTIVES

By using this section you will be able to:

- Form effective groups

- Devise action plans for group activity

- Set ground rules for group activity

- Delegate effectively

- Provide constructive feedback to others

- Evaluate your own input and the work of the group

CONTENTS

- Working in groups

- Why groups?

- Groups at university

- Assessing group work

- Important group skills

- Key stages in group work

- Group formation

- Group planning

- Implementing your plans

- Completing the activity

- Evaluating group performance

Working in groups

This section introduces you to the rôle that group learning plays within university learning, exploring the many different forms of group activity, the skills needed for successful group collaboration and the process of planning successful group activities.

Why groups?

Group work can be immensely valuable for a variety of reasons.

Groups:

- share ideas and experiences

- offer an alternative to working on your own

- draw on your particular strengths and experiences

- increase the quality of output

- find ways of solving problems

- provide a supportive environment for challenging work

- develop essential skills for use throughout your career.

Groups at university

Throughout your time at university you will experience many different forms of group activity.

This section will focus on those groups formed as either an informal or formal part of your studies. However, much of the advice can be equally applied to other group activities such as those undertaken in your spare time.

- You may be asked to work in groups during lectures and seminars to discuss issues and tackle specific problems.

- Or you may be asked to work in a group to prepare a presentation or lead a seminar.

- Some group activities replace examinations or are used to fulfil complex course work requirements.

Group activities are often more complex than those which could be handled individually and will be carefully planned by your tutor to accommodate teams of students.

Assessing group work

Group work is often assessed on more than one level. Some of the most common are as follows:

- Group product: What is the quality of the final outcome (the presentation or report)?

- Group process: How successfully has the group worked together? How effectively have you managed your work?

- Individual contribution: You may be asked to submit a report focusing on your contribution to the group activity as a whole.

- Self and peer assessment : Sometimes students are asked to assess their own performance and/or the contributions of others. This may or may not contribute to the final group mark.

Grading group work

Each member of your group may be awarded an overall group grade or individual variations will be calculated through the use of personal evidence such as self and peer assessment, individual accounts and interviews with your supervising tutor.

Important group skills

In order to maximise the advantages of group work you will need to be aware of the following interpersonal skills:

- **Communication** - writing, talking and listening, the use of body language

- **Observation** - awareness of others, overall sensitivity to the group

- **Self** - **expression** - the assertiveness to make an active contribution to the group, without dominating the group activity

- **Supporting Others** - managing stressful situations, helping others with difficult work, providing constructive comment.

They are all necessary to create a productive group environment.

Key stages in group work

Whether you are involved in formal group project work or more informal discussion groups, all group activity commonly develops in the following way:

- **Group formation**
  Who is in the group?
  What are your individual strengths?
  How can these be used effectively?
  How will the group work together?

- **Group planning**
  What needs to be done?
  How long have you got to do it?
  How can the work be divided amongst the group?
  How will the group communicate throughout the activity?

- **Implementation of plan**
  How will the group support each other?
  How will you discuss each other's work?
  How will progress be monitored?

- **Completion of activity**
  How will you shape the end product?
  Will different strengths suit different tasks
  to complete the project?
  What work will you be assessed upon?
  Is there sufficient evidence of group
  collaboration?

- **Evaluation of group performance**
  How effectively did you work as a team?
  How much support did you provide for
  each other?
  What key things went well in the group
  work?
  What key things went badly?
  What lessons can be learned from these?

We shall now explore each of these stages in turn.

Group formation

Groups can be established in a number of different ways. Sometimes students are simply asked to work with friends, other times you may be placed in randomly selected groups. Sometimes groups are formed according to the specific strengths of individuals.

However your group has been formed, any newly formed team of people needs time to adjust and to adapt to each other's personalities, skill strengths and working patterns. Successful groups learn to capitalise upon these differences, making them explicit at the outset and organising the group activity accordingly.

Discussing your previous experiences of group work may help you to identify individual strengths and preferences. These can then be applied to the groups's work and responsibility can be shared out.

The formation stage is not restricted to the start of a group activity. As group members learn more about each other, the group dynamic will continually change and the group will need to be sensitive to such changes, adapting working practice as necessary.

Setting ground rules

Any team needs to be guided by a common set of rules that are shared amongst and understood by all those involved. This ensures that each of you knows what will be expected of you and how work will be divided, work supported and outcomes developed. For example:

> *This group will:*
>
> *- draw on individual expertise*
> *- encourage constructive debate of writing strategies*
> *- provide a supportive environment for feedback*
> *- report back at weekly meetings*
> *- avoid discriminatory language / behaviour*

Discuss your group's ground rules in light of the tasks that you have been set.

Group planning

As a group you will need to plan effectively. There are several key planning stages that can help you do this effectively.

Identify your objectives

The group as a whole needs to be clear about what it **wants** to achieve and what it **needs** to achieve. Clearly establishing your end goal at the start of a project will ensure that the group is working towards the same point, leading to fewer disagreements.

- What needs to be done?
  What brief have you been set?

- What do we want to get done?
  What standards will you wish to adhere to?

- How long have you got ?

Delegation

Each main activity that you have been set can be broken up into smaller sub-tasks which can then be shared amongst the group.

Delegating tasks takes advantage of individual strengths and weaknesses. For example, you may wish to pair off an ideas person with a natural leader, or a supportive person with an unconfident one.

You will need to be sensitive to the need to reappraise delegated roles during extended group activity. If you find yourself carrying out tasks you seem to have acquired rather than having had delegated, you should ask whether you are the most appropriate person to carry out the task.

It may be useful in terms of motivation to vary delegated task-group sizes so that each of you has a chance to work on your own and in a task group.

Setting intermediate deadlines

For each of your individual tasks, set intermediate deadlines so that the group project as a whole can be realised on time. Make sure that these are realistic and that they are adhered to.

Intermediate deadlines can be used to help structure group activity, reconvening the main group for a meeting to discuss progress and form new plans for the next stage of the project.

Implementing your plans

It is often at the stage of implementation that groups can fall apart, operating as unconnected individuals. If you are being assessed on your group performance and wish to maintain the quality-enhancing benefit of group work, you will need to carefully monitor and support this stage.

Communication

This stage in your group work can be greatly enhanced though the careful maintenance of communication between all group members.

Communication within a group can be supported by:

- Using your planning deadlines to re-group and discuss your personal and group progress

- Carefully organising group meetings

- The recording of group meetings and circulation of these records as minutes

- Sharing addresses and phone numbers.

Communication should be effective but you should avoid any time-consuming measures as these are unlikely to succeed when set against the pressure to achieve the main task within the given time.

Giving feedback

When working in a group, you will have many opportunities to comment upon other people's work. There are several golden rules to follow if you are to help people improve by supplying constructive feedback. The following guidelines may be useful:

- Be positive.

- Remember that work may well be at a developmental stage.
  Don't criticise a draft as if it were the final product.

- People can only accept three items of criticism.
  Any more disheartens.

- Focus on the main issues.
  Don't focus on minor issues unless they are the only things that are wrong.

- Remember that everyone has a different way of doing things.
  Be flexible and avoid focusing on how you would have done it.

- Start and finish with something positive.
  Be helpful, not harmful.

- Always be aware of how something could be improved.
  Don't simply criticise.

Completing the activity

Once your project is nearing completion, it may be sensible to regroup and devise a strategy for completion.

Often the skills and roles required from group members at the point of completion are quite different from those required to initiate and implement the project.

Whilst some people may have the talent to conceive a project from scratch, devising a strategy and steering the wider development, these may not be the most able people to follow up all the intricate detail that arises towards the end of a project.

You will need to be aware of each other's strengths and weaknesses, and to be able to discuss these honestly and openly if you are to make the most use of your group membership.

Evaluating group performance

Group work skills are held in high esteem by graduate employers and it may be useful for you to reflect upon your group's performance.

- How effectively did you plan?
- What role did you play most frequently in the group?
- What key things went well with the group work?
- What things didn't go well?

Use the evaluation sheet at the end of this section to assess your group's activities. This sheet can be used to inform whole group discussions as well as help you evaluate your individual performance.

Group work summary

Working in groups presents both a challenge and an opportunity for improved productivity.

The group skills that you develop as part of your studies will also play a crucial rôle in securing future employment. Group work is seen as an increasingly important part of both studying in higher education and working in employment.

Group work checklist

- **Group formation**
  Who is in the group?
  What are your individual strengths?
  How can these be used effectively?
  How will the group work together?

- **Group planning**
  What needs to be done?
  How long have you got to do it?
  How can the work be divided amongst the group?
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- **Implementation of plan**
  How will the group support each other?
  How will you discuss each other's work?
  How will progress be monitored?

- **Completion of activity**
  How will you shape the end product?
  What work will you be assessed upon?
  Is there sufficient evidence of group collaboration?
  Do different strengths suit different tasks to complete the project?

- **Evaluation of group performance**
  How effectively did you work as a team?
  How much support did you provide for each other?
  What key things went well in the group work?
  What key things went badly?
  What lessons can be learned from these?

Evaluation Sheet

What are your feelings about the group activities?

_____
_____
_____
_____

What did you notice about;

Yourself | Others
_____|_____

1 _____
2 _____
3 _____

Name 3 things you did well

Name 3 things others did well

1 _____
2 _____
3 _____

1 _____
2 _____
3 _____

Name 3 things you didn't do so well

Name 3 things others didn't do so well

1 _____
2 _____
3 _____

Q Change these into "problem questions" and discuss them with your group